



# What is an independent art space? Using a text-mining approach to describe independent art spaces

Maria Vorobeva 

Faculty of Social Science and International Laboratory for Applied Network Research, HSE University, Moscow, Russia

## ABSTRACT

The ability of independent art spaces to create new practices in the arts is recognised, alongside with their influence on the socio-economic development of places in which they appear. Yet, art spaces remain poorly understood, as present studies look only at individual examples of these places. In this paper, using text mining methods, 1537 descriptions of independent art spaces, located worldwide, are investigated to provide insights into what is an independent art space, by defining its common features. The study finds that independent art spaces are described as non-profit, artist-run places, striving to bring together local and international cultures and engage artists in cooperation. Besides, independent art spaces offer both public platforms and workplaces for artists, promoting creativity and experimental art. The identified features can contribute to the debate over the connection between art spaces and socio-economic development.

## KEYWORDS

Independent art spaces;  
artist-run centres;  
community development;  
text mining; topic modelling

## Introduction

Voluntary non-profit organisations make a significant contribution to social and economic development (Feldman, 1997; Uphoff, 1993). In the OECD countries, these organisations mainly work in areas of health services, poverty relief, education, and arts (Bilodeau & Steinberg, 2006). In the field of arts, there is growing interest in independent or alternative art spaces. Besides working as art galleries, these places also perform a range of voluntary and public services. Recent studies recognise the influence of independent art spaces on economic and community development, appearing at the places they are located (Lim et al., 2019; Zilberstein, 2019).

This influence is explained by multiple reasons. Some studies suggest that by creating a community of mutual help, independent art spaces help to solve social problems, through the collective and self-organized actions of citizens (Grodach, 2010). Art spaces conduct educational and retraining programmes, raise funds for vulnerable groups and people in need (Canclini, 2017; Gainza, 2018). As non-profit organisations, independent art spaces not only provide public services but also drive social changes. Alternative art spaces facilitate the social and cultural transition by creating a platform for the expression of the most recent public opinion (Brown, 2017; Zilberstein, 2019). Independent art spaces

encourage innovative and experimental art, which opposes the mainstream culture, changing the cultural landscape (Blessi et al., 2011; Malatjie, 2013). Furthermore, independent art spaces promote diversity. They represent the culture of different ethnic communities and views of diverse social groups, engaging different people in joint activities (Aldashev et al., 2018; Grodach, 2010).

However, despite their roles and influence on societal development, independent art spaces remain overlooked and poorly studied. Currently, most studies on independent or alternative art spaces look at the individual examples and work with methods of case study, providing insights only on particular places (Blessi et al., 2011; Grodach, 2010; Grodach, 2011; Lim et al., 2019; Lobo, 2018; Malatjie, 2013; Rego & Borges, 2021).

The present work delivers the first comprehensive description of an independent art space as a type of organisation at the level of quantitative analysis. With the use of text mining methods, I analyse the 1537 textual descriptions of independent or alternative art spaces collected from the [alternativeartguide.com](http://alternativeartguide.com). Text mining is a set of natural language processing and machine learning techniques for working with unstructured textual data. These methods allow for automatic analysis of large amounts of texts, discovering words' frequencies, their similarity, and common patterns in texts. I use these techniques to discover common features of independent art spaces, based on their textual descriptions. The study deals with the self-representation of independent art spaces, rather than with the investigation of how art spaces operate in reality. In the research, I delve into the issue of what common features describe independent or alternative art spaces all over the world. The intensity of an embodiment of these features in a certain place remains out of the scope of the study. This paper aims to summarise and supplement the conclusions made in previous studies (Byrne et al., 2006; Grodach, 2010, 2011; Lim et al., 2019; Lobo, 2018; Malatjie, 2013; Salzbrunn, 2014; Zilberstein, 2019), with the results of a quantitative analysis of textual descriptions and provide an answer to the question "What is an independent art space?". I argue that independent art spaces hold a range of specific features, which can explain their influence on the economic and community development of the places, where they are located.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section reviews previous studies on independent art spaces, providing the framework for the future analysis. The methods used in the study are described in the next section. Following this, I present the results of the analysis of descriptions and summarise features of independent art spaces. The last section incorporates the findings into the existing discussion and concludes.

## Independent and alternative art spaces: related studies

Over the last decade, independent or alternative art spaces have acquired significant attention, not only in the public eye, but in academia as well. In this section, I provide an overview of previous studies on independent art spaces to grasp a preliminary understanding of what is an independent or alternative art space, framing the context for the further exploration of its definition.

The first independent art spaces appeared in the 1960s, in New York and other American cities (Blessi et al., 2011). Unlike "white-cube" galleries, independent art spaces were not just the blank venues for exhibitions but also places for voluntary associations among artists and socially engaged art. These independent art galleries were collectively run by

artists and activists, often under the influence of political or social movements. Independent galleries and art spaces were created for artists who did not fit in commercial frameworks, and whose work was often in the opposition to the popular and mainstream art (Sharon, 1979). Another initial purpose of such places was to reduce the gap between the centre of a city, with an abundance of galleries and other cultural facilities, and the periphery, lacking these places (Malatjie, 2013).

Appearing at the periphery of cities, independent art spaces often occupy old buildings in former industrial areas (Lim et al., 2019). Thus, they are used to modernise urban space (Zilberstein, 2019). In recent years, independent art spaces have gained the reputation of being a powerful source of the revitalisation of industrial neighbourhoods (Gainza, 2018; Grodach, 2010). Since independent art spaces are grassroots initiatives led by citizens defending their interests, the revitalisation becomes community-centred (Sasajima, 2013; Zebracki, 2018). Independent art spaces contribute to the development of a local community and economy. They support local cultural practices and craftsmen and protect them from the influence and competition of global trends. Instead of creating a new order, independent art spaces try to find a compromise between local culture and globalisation, negotiating new possibilities and local traditions (Dinardi, 2017; Zilberstein, 2019). They ease the conflict caused by the gentrification process.

The highlighted roles of independent art spaces, once again, underline the uniqueness and importance of these places. How can independent art spaces foster community development and citizen-led revitalisation of a neighbourhood? Studying the roles that twelve independent art spaces play in the social and economic development of cities in the United States, Grodach (2011) identified four types of independent art spaces, based on their main purposes. He defined art cooperatives, art incubators, ethnic-specific art spaces, and community art or cultural spaces. Art cooperatives are run by a group of artists or curators, and facilitate collaboration. According to Sharon (1979), who studied several pioneer independent art spaces in California, interaction between artists and collaboration was initially one of the main attributes of independent art spaces. Therefore, I expected the appearance of words related to collaboration and collective work in the descriptions of independent art spaces. As art incubators, independent art spaces provide technical equipment and space for artists or organisations. The importance of this role for the development of visual arts in Ireland was studied by Byrne et al. (2006). Ethnic-specific art spaces promote the art and culture of a specific racial or ethnic group (Grodach, 2011, p. 77). Community or cultural spaces are multifunctional places for local artists and communities. They focus on the engagement of a local community in artistic practices (Glover, 2004). As was discovered in the examples of art spaces in Australia (Lobo, 2018), as well as France and South Korea (Lim et al., 2019), through engagement, the sense of belonging appears, and the community becomes more bonded. Moreover, by providing public services, independent art spaces serve as community gathering places (Grodach, 2010). Independent art spaces promote contemporary and experimental art. This also connects them with societal development, since experimental and alternative art often focus on social issues (Bishop, 2012; Dewinter et al., 2020; Gladston, 2016).

Independent art spaces challenge the mainstream commercial art and reinterpret established social order. This process was described in Malatjie (2013), who defined the

roles of alternative art spaces in Johannesburg, and in Zilberstein (2019), who studied grassroots art organisations in Chicago. Contemporary art promotes the values of freedom and multiculturalism (Wang, 2019). Based on the study of how different social groups use art spaces in Germany for manifesting their values, Salzbrunn (2014) states that experimental art and multicultural values reshape the prevailing culture. Appearing diversity may foster innovations and development (Lee et al., 2004). I expected these values to be ingrained in the descriptions of independent art spaces.

Independent art spaces were created to challenge commercial and popular art and the culture it represents. They were established by artists and curators who did not fit into the framework of mainstream culture. Independent art spaces serve not only as galleries but also as public spaces, carrying social services. Previous studies have described a range of independent art spaces features, helping to shed light on these places. Despite this, there is still no common understanding of an independent art space, since previous studies are based on a case-study approach, describing individual examples of these places. The aim of the present study is to provide this understanding. In this paper, through investigating independent art spaces around the world, I define the common features of independent art spaces as public organisations.

## Method

For the data collection, the web scraping (or web content mining) method was used (Cooley et al., 1997). This method enables an automatic gathering of information from websites. Web scraping is one of the most used tools for data collection from the Internet for the purpose of social science research (Li et al., 2019). The main advantage of this technique is the collection of data on thousands of observations in a short time (Landers et al., 2016). The review of advantages of this method can be found in Lazer and Radford (2017). In the present research, web scraping allowed me to gather information on the descriptions of independent art spaces stored on the website.

The data were collected from [alternativeartguide.com](http://alternativeartguide.com). This site provides the largest online overview of independent art spaces located all over the world. These places include interdisciplinary performance spaces, visual art exhibition spaces, galleries, and music venues. There are data on more than 1700 independent art spaces placed on the site. I gathered information about the country and town of a place's location, contacts, and the description of a place. The main purpose of this research was to analyse these descriptions to grasp the collective definition of what constitutes an "independent art space". It should be noted that considering the textual description of an art space, I looked at a self-representation of a place. Thus, I investigated how a place describes itself and its aims.

For this research, 1537 textual descriptions of independent art spaces were used. The data cover 126 countries spanning the UK, Europe, North and South America, Australia, and Oceania. Most art spaces are located in the Netherlands (157), Switzerland (154), and Germany (143). Such distribution of countries can be explained by the fact that the [alternativeartguide.com](http://alternativeartguide.com) platform is supported by an initiative based in the Hague, Netherlands. The full list of countries is in the Appendix.

The data were analysed using text mining methods. During the last decade, the text mining approach has acquired large popularity in the field of social science in response

to the growing amount of text data created online and due to the development of practical tools for the collection of these data, such as web scraping (Evans & Aceves, 2016). Text mining is a set of natural language processing and machine learning techniques for working with unstructured textual data.

Before working with textual data, texts were pre-processed, following a set of regular requirements. Commonly, pre-processing includes three stages: tokenization, lemmatisation, and stop words elimination (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Firstly, the texts were cleaned: punctuation, symbols, and spaces were removed from the text data, words were converted to lowercase format. Then, the words in cleaned texts were converted to lemmas, or dictionary forms, that simplifies subsequent automated work with them. This is necessary for the correctness of the further analysis, which uses a calculation of the words' frequencies. The frequency analysis demands one word and its different forms to be considered as the same word. This procedure can be understood in terms of a standardisation of values. Then, stop words were excluded from the texts, i.e. words that hold a grammatical function but do not reveal the semantic content of a document, as a rule, are prepositions, conjunctions, and articles (Wilbur & Sirotkin, 1992). In this research, the words "art", "space", "artist", "exhibition", and "contemporary" also were considered as stop words and were removed. Even though they are ordinary words carrying semantic meaning, their frequent use in the analysed texts complicated the detection of other textual patterns. In the end, the text data were tokenised – texts and sentences were divided into separate words or other units of the analysis such as bigrams. Based on the data consisting of 1537 descriptions, I obtained 49,299 tokens – unique words, and 47,769 bigrams – unique two-word sequences. These data became the database for the future analysis.

First, using a frequency analysis of bigrams, I examined the most common features of independent art spaces. Frequency analysis by highlighting bigrams and counting the number of their appearances in the entire corpus of text allows for the selection of the most popular two-word combinations. I looked at the words which are often used together for describing independent art spaces. Based on this, I highlighted the common features of independent or alternative art spaces. Further, a network visualisation was performed for further analysis of connections between popular words. The association was based on the words' co-occurrence. If two words occurred together in all texts more than six times,<sup>1</sup> the connection for these words was established and displayed on a graph. By looking at the connections among frequently used words, I grasped the structure of a typical description of an independent art space.

Then, I investigated textual descriptions more precisely by exploring the range of possible themes existing in these descriptions. For this, the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) modelling method was used (Jelodar et al., 2019), implemented with the gensim python module (Řehůřek & Sojka, 2011). The method searches for latent topics contained in the analysed texts. Based on the data, eight topics were identified. The model with eight topics had the highest rate of coherence – the consistency of words within a topic based on the terms' co-occurrence frequencies within a text corpus (O'Callaghan et al., 2015), as well as the lowest rate of perplexity, i.e. the ability of the model to predict words on new documents (Rosen-Zvi et al., 2004). Considering the perplexity score, the lowest values correspond to a better fitting of the model. The model with eight topics also had the highest sparsity, which refers to a low intersection of words

between topics. Topics were described by nine representative interconnected words for each topic with weights. The weights are understood in terms of the significance of the particular word for the topic. Words and weights were used for an interpretation of the topic. In the present work, each topic did not describe the art space itself but rather describe topics that emerged in the descriptions of independent art spaces.

The conducted analysis provided the general description of independent art spaces, revealing common features and possible purposes of these places.

### Findings

This section introduces the results of the analysis of textual descriptions of independent or alternative art spaces. I use common words and textual frames, discovered in the descriptions, to create the composite definition of an independent or alternative art space.

Based on the frequency analysis of words in the independent art spaces' descriptions, I identify the twenty most popular two-word sequences (or bigrams). [Table 1](#) presents their frequencies. These words elucidate the most popular features of independent art spaces.

Independent art spaces are non-profit organisations. The analysis of their descriptions confirmed this feature. The phrase "non-profit organisation" occupies the first place in the frequency table of common bigrams. The phrase "independent non-profit" is also common (12th place). Another feature that emphasises the art spaces' independence is self-organisation; the "artist-run gallery" bigram is found in 11th place. The combination of global and local perspectives seems to be a popular trait of independent art spaces. The bigrams "national international" and "local international" are in 2nd and 3rd places in the frequency table respectively. These phrases suggest that, when describing themselves, many independent art spaces emphasise the desire to establish the connection between the local culture and the global trends. The "around world" bigram is in 14th place. This bigram can be considered as another evidence that art spaces aim to incorporate international perspectives into their values and activity.

The words "residency program" (6th place) and "provide platform" (9th place) point at the function that independent art spaces tend to perform. The frequent feature of these places is that they provide, not only a place for artists to exhibit their works, but also a place for them to create their works. These organisations act as the so-called art incubators, serving not only as exhibition galleries but also as places where works are created and where artists' working residences are located.

**Table 1.** Most frequent bigrams in the art spaces' descriptions.

Nº	Bigram	Frequency	Nº	Bigram	Frequency
1	non-profit organisation	51	11	artist-run gallery	21
2	national international	42	12	independent non-profit	20
3	local international	38	13	new idea	20
4	artistic practice	38	14	around world	18
5	new work	29	15	take place	17
6	residency programme	25	16	bring together	17
7	wide range	22	17	local national	17
8	production presentation	22	18	film screening	17
9	provide platform	22	19	visual culture	16
10	new york	21	20	gallery found	16

Figure 1 outlines the connections between the most frequent co-occurred words in the descriptions, helping to take a more complex look at the identified features.

Independent art spaces aim to provide a platform or a public space. There is a connection between the words “provide”, “platform”, and “aim”. The intersection between these words indicates that the curators of many independent art spaces intentionally use the provision of public platforms as one of the purposes of their places.

An independent art space is a project, cultural centre, or gallery, independently managed by artists. I derived this from the connection between the words: “project”, “artist-run”, “centre”, and “gallery”. Moreover, besides serving as an exhibition place or a venue for events, an independent art space yields the place where artworks and projects are created. The word “gallery” is often used with the word “studio” for describing a place.

Independent art spaces bring people together for collaboration and collective production (bring – together – work) and strive for the creation of a new order and trends (idea – new – medium). Within independent art spaces, artists not only create artworks but also dedicate themselves to research in the field of arts (practice – artistic – research).

The words “local”, “national”, and “international” are interconnected. This relation also speaks up for the art spaces’ motivation to build a bridge between local, national, and international cultures and artists.

I can summarise the following common features of independent art spaces: running on a non-profit basis, self-organisation, a combination of local, national, and international art and cultures, provision of public platforms and places for artists to work, and involvement of artists in collaborative projects.

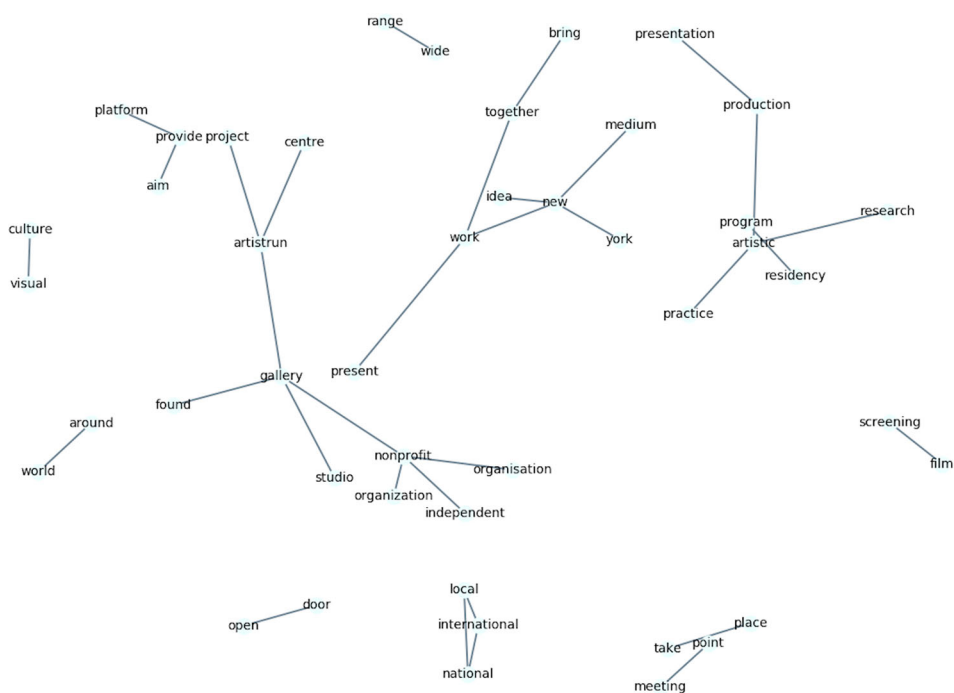


Figure 1. Connections between the 30 most frequent words in the art spaces’ descriptions.

Further, with the use of topic identification in the descriptions, I delved into the features of independent art spaces, examining a wider range of their functions and the context in which they are mentioned. [Table 2](#) lists topics which emerged in the descriptions, with words comprising each topic and the percentage of appearance for the topic.

### ***Topic 1: support of creativity***

One of the topics that appeared in the descriptions is the support of creativity. The unique words for this topic are “support” and two words related to creativity: “creative” and “create”. Independent art spaces are described as places where an artist can find support for his or her creative ideas and projects. The words “work” and “project” are also highly relevant for the topic.

### ***Topic 2: history of the creation***

Another emerging topic refers to the history of the creation of a place. Art spaces often write about their founders and mention the date of establishment in the descriptions. The words “since”, “found”, and “run”, indicate this. The words “since” and “run” are unique for the second topic. I assumed that these words belong to the sentences stating that a place works since a specified date, and is run or founded by a curator or organisation.

### ***Topic 3: public space***

The third topic reveals the role of independent art space as an open and public place. Independent art spaces are open to the public, allowing a wide range of visitors to participate in their activities. This feature was introduced previously in the set of most frequent words. The topic is quite common. About 15% of analysed art spaces emphasise that they operate as open and public organisations.

### ***Topic 4: aims as a topic***

The fourth topic is quite unclear since it combined words that have higher significance in other topics. However, this topic includes the word “aim”, and this word appears only in this topic. The presence of this word is particularly important in the research as it highlights the role of textual descriptions. In these descriptions, many art spaces purposely mention their aims. During the next step, I scrutinised this topic to understand the context in which the word “aim” is used. By looking at this context, I determined the possible aims of the independent art spaces.

### ***Topic 5: collaboration***

The topic indicated that independent art spaces promote collaborative work. The unique word “group” and the high weight of the word “work” for the theme support this idea. I have encountered this theme before, in the exploration of frequent words. The discovered



**Table 2.** Topics revealed in the art spaces' descriptions.

No	Words for topic	Coverage**
1	.011*work + .007project + .007found + .006support + .005creative + .005cultural + .005create + .005artistic + .005international	9.6%
2	.016project + .009since + .008gallery + .008found + .007new + .005international + .005run + .005development + .005artistic	9.8%
3	.011gallery + .010work + .009public + .009project + .009new + .007performance + .006base + .006international + .006platform	15.3%
4	.017project + .007work + .006public + .006gallery + .006cultural + .005independent + .005new + .005aim + .005open	12.5%
5	.016work + .012gallery + .009new + .009project + .007practice + .006artistic + .005group + .005cultural + .005international	13.2%
6	.011gallery + .008project + .006found + .006create + .005new + .005event + .005studio + .005community + .004work	7.4%
7	.015project + .011work + .009gallery + .007nonprofit + .007international + .006found + .006practice + .006artistic + .005visual	13.1%
8	.011gallery + .010project + .009international + .008work + .008program + .008nonprofit + .007artistic + .007local + .006centre	18.8%

\*Hereinafter: the number corresponds to the weight of the word in the topic.

\*\*0.4% of descriptions did not match any topic.

topic, once again, underlined that independent art spaces encourage artists and participants to work together.

### **Topic 6: multifunctionality of an art space**

Independent art spaces perform a wide range of roles. They are galleries, studios, projects, and places for events. The topic combined independent art spaces, which state either the exact type of their places or list all possible types in the descriptions.

### **Topic 7: visual arts**

The word “visual” is distinctive for the topic. This word suggests that independent or alternative art spaces mostly deliver visual art among its different kinds. As noted in the method section, the word “exhibition” was one of the most used words in the descriptions, which supports this claim.

### **Topic 8: features of an organisation**

The last topic included adjectives, which describe independent art spaces: international, non-profit, artistic, local. These words have already appeared in the frequency analysis. Many independent art spaces mention these features in the descriptions since the topic is the most popular one (18.8%).

The fourth topic particularly grabbed the attention, as the word “aim” indicated that the topic combined descriptions in which art spaces’ aims and purposes are specified. I continued by looking at three descriptions which match the fourth topic. Thus, I put the word “aim” in the context of its use and investigated the possible aims of independent art spaces.

In the first relevant description (Description 1), the word “aim” appeared in the context of creation of a centre for innovation, artists’ interaction, and knowledge exchange. I have already discovered that a common feature of many independent art spaces is the desire to create new tendencies in art and culture. Here I can expose this feature in the context of knowledge exchange and collective work.

Description 1. SAW, Ottawa, Canada, probability to belong to the fourth topic: 99.3%

From its inception in 1973, the artist-run centre Galerie SAW Gallery has supported politically and socially engaged art, focusing on the performance and media arts. Many of the world’s best-known artists have exhibited at SAW in the early stages of their careers. Begun by a group of local artists, the gallery was originally part of the legendary café Le Hibou on Sussex Drive, hence the name SAW, an acronym for Sussex Annex Works. In 1981, the centre founded the SAW Video cooperative to support independent video artists and documentarists. During this time, the centre also initiated Club SAW, which has become the most important multidisciplinary space in the region. In 1989, Galerie SAW Gallery, SAW Video and Club SAW moved into the historic Arts Court building. Since 2001, Galerie SAW Gallery has operated as a distinct organization no longer legally affiliated with SAW Video, although both share a home at Arts Court and continue to collaborate on many projects. *Galerie SAW Gallery aims to become a premier artist-run centre in Canada and the world, engaging in innovative programming, outreach and exchange initiatives.* With over 30,000 visitors each year, SAW is a prime destination in the OttawaGatineau region for contemporary art.

Another description (Description 2) placed the word “aim” in the context of the art space’s purpose to connect national and international experiences, as well as to be engaged in social research. The first aim mentioned here was already highlighted in the analysis of frequent words. The second aim discovered in this description showed that art spaces also may serve as centres for the study and research of art and culture.

Description 2. SixtyEight Art Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark, probability to belong to the fourth topic: 99.2%

Art Institute is a non-profit art institute which focuses on giving artistic and curatorial talents the opportunity to imagine and present new exhibition-making possibilities, and asks how these can intersect with other institutions and organisations. The institute is dedicated to strengthening the independent and practical approach to artistic production through its programme and the events at our physical exhibition space for contemporary art in the centre of Copenhagen. The institute dedicates part of its annual programme to exhibitions planned by external curators and artists, which are supplemented by a public programme, seminars and publications with peers and scholars connected to the research topics and agendas in the exhibition programme. *SixtyEight Art Institute programme aims to consider the connections between Nordic, European and International developments within curatorial and artistic research and how these intersect with contemporary sociology, science, literature and philosophy.* SixtyEight Art Institute is an intimate space, both in terms of the way audiences meet with art and the ideas it generates, and in the way the institute works closely with partners and focuses on co-productions. SixtyEight Art Institute works primarily with artists and curators who base their practice on research. With this in mind (and at a fundamental level) SixtyEight Art Institute will be working as an independent space dedicated to making a difference to and having an impact on issues of diversity, creative exchange and artistic development.

Having a high probability of belonging to the fourth topic, the third description (Description 3) did not include the word “aim”. This description revealed that research activity tends to be conducted within the art space’s walls. Based on this and the previous description, I can distinguish another aim of independent art spaces – an engagement in the research activity devoted to art and culture.

Description 3. Studio Omstand, Arnhem, The Netherlands, probability to belong to the fourth topic: 99.2%

Omstand is an artist’s initiative and a cultural organization for contemporary visual arts. We focus on exciting, challenging and autonomous artistic expressions in which the investigative aspect plays an important role. We organize, among other things, exhibitions in which a visual, energetic field of tension between the spectators and the art (and others) is paramount. We offer artists exhibition space at special locations and challenge artists to develop new work or present the existing work in a new context, taking into account exhibition circumstances. *Omstand wants not only to show artists the work but to let the artist play the widest possible role: as a curator, researcher, theorist, designer, critic, etc.* It is a personal trajectory between the artist, the spaces of Omstand and the supervisors of Omstand. For Omstand it is important that artists with whom Omstand enter into a relationship also have an eye for the work of other artists. *We also stimulate collaboration between artists themselves.* We do this by asking artists to take on the role of curator. In practice, Omstand functions as a partner. The compilation and curating of exhibitions are done together. This applies to participating artists as well as (guest) curators, where they work together and in good consultation. We share responsibility for the end product with the organizations and people that Omstand involves in the implementation of its program. Sometimes it is only limited to giving

feedback or advice, but the end result can also result in a presentation in our exhibition program.

The analysis revealed such aims of independent art spaces as collaboration and exchange of knowledge, the bridging between local and international culture, and the research activity. This is a possible, but not limited, list of independent art space aims. I also find that independent art spaces support creativity and operate as multifunctional places, offering studios and galleries for artists, as well as venues for performances.

## Discussion and conclusion

This research contributes to the understanding of the concept of an independent or alternative art space. Although there is a rich body of studies devoted to these places, we still lack in their complex examination, especially at the quantitative level. The findings revealed several distinctive features of independent or alternative art spaces.

Many independent or alternative art spaces emphasise that they operate as non-profit organisations in their descriptions. The study also finds that many independent art spaces are self-organised and artist-run places. These two features address the independence of art spaces. By keeping the independence from authorities and government funding, and not engaging in commercial activities, independent art spaces manifest themselves as flexible places for experimentation (Dewinter et al., 2020; Rego & Borges, 2021). Findings support this idea of a connection between independence and the focus on experimentation embedded in art spaces' features. I observed words describing the promotion of experimental and innovative art in the descriptions of independent art spaces. Focus on experimentation and the discovered desire to rethink conventional practices give independent art spaces the capacity to drive social changes.

Furthermore, descriptions demonstrated that independent art spaces promote group work and collaboration, engaging artists in the collective creation of art. Collective work fosters creativity and innovation (Brown, 2017). The intention of art spaces, to support creativity, also appeared among themes in their descriptions. Through collaboration and creativity, independent art spaces aim to facilitate the diffusion of ideas and knowledge. The focus on the encouragement of cooperation between artists was discovered in the earliest studies on art spaces (Sharon, 1979). Contemporary independent art spaces retain this feature. Moreover, some independent art spaces devote their activity to research practices, investigating the art and its social role. Following the idea of Glaeser (1994), I offer that independent art spaces can contribute to economic and societal development through the exchange of ideas and the knowledge stimulated by them.

The findings reported here showed that independent art spaces provide public platforms for artists or organisations. This is consistent with the findings of numerous case studies on independent art spaces (Brown, 2017; Grodach, 2010; Zilberstein, 2019). In the present research, I concluded that the provision of public platforms, for projects and initiatives, serves as one of the main aims of many independent art spaces, since the findings revealed that the word "aim" often appears with the words "provide" and "platform" in the descriptions of art spaces. Independent art spaces create an open environment where diverse projects can find a place to perform their activity and arrange meetings.

Independent or alternative art spaces are not only public venues for exhibitions, meetings, and performances, but also places where artists can create art. As mentioned in the literature review section, some independent art spaces operate as art incubators by providing shared workspaces and equipment and conducting programmes to stimulate artistic and business skills (Byrne et al., 2006). The words “studio” and “residency” are frequently used for describing the activity of independent art spaces. However, the study did not find evidence to support the idea of special training for artists.

Another common feature of independent art spaces is the intention to establish the connection between local art and culture and international artists. Independent art spaces foster the assimilation of international trends in the local culture. This contradicts Grodach’s (2011) research, in which he finds barriers to collaboration and interaction beyond the local art scene, studying independent art spaces in Dallas. However, he requested further exploration since he expected that it can be the trait of the Dallas community. In this paper, I offered insight, suggesting that independent art spaces strive to build cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration.

Although previous studies stated that community development is the common purpose of independent art spaces (Lim et al., 2019; Lobo, 2018; Zilberstein, 2019), I did not discover the word “community” in the most used words in art spaces’ descriptions. I assumed that the community development is not an intentional aim of independent art spaces, but rather this influence exists due to the other unique features and purposes of these places.

Based on discovered features, I can offer a summing definition for an independent or alternative art space. An independent art space is a non-profit, artist-run organisation that promotes experimental art and provides a public platform and multifunctional venue. Independent art spaces encourage cooperation and connect local, national and international artists.

These features are found in the descriptions of more than a thousand independent art spaces located all over the world. Therefore, these features may describe the essence of an independent art space as a cultural institution. The present study identified the set of important features, starting from art spaces’ support of creativity and innovative art practices through the contribution to the adaptation of international trends, ending with the knowledge and information exchange fostered by them. Future studies may focus on one or several discovered features of independent or alternative art spaces, to investigate how these features empower art spaces to foster community and economic development.

## Note

1. The threshold of six words was chosen to establish the optimal number of connections between words.

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## Notes on contributor

**Maria Vorobeva** is a Research Assistant at the Faculty of Social Science and International Laboratory for Applied Network Research at HSE University, Moscow, Russia.

## ORCID

Maria Vorobeva  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4974-7546>

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** The full list of countries covered by collected descriptions of art spaces.

No	Country	Number of art spaces	No	Country	Number of art spaces	No	Country	Number of art spaces
1	The Netherlands	157	61	Slovakia	4	101	Bhutan	1
2	Switzerland	154	62	Taiwan	4	102	Cameroon	1
3	Germany	143	63	Trinidad and Tobago	4	103	Congo	1
4	United States	141	64	Zimbabwe	4	104	Costa Rica	1
5	United Kingdom	123	65	Albania	3	105	Ecuador	1
6	Italy	59	66	Armenia	3	106	Guatemala	1
7	Belgium	55	67	Belarus	3	107	Kazakhstan	1
8	Australia	39	68	Croatia	3	108	Kosovo	1
9	France	37	69	Cyprus	3	109	Kyrgyzstan	1
10	Sweden	31	70	Georgia	3	110	Luxembourg	1
11	Czech Republic	30	71	Kenya	3	111	Macedonia, The Former Yugoslav Republic Of	1
12	Denmark	29	72	Palestinian Territory, Occupied	3	112	Mali	1
13	Greece	28	73	Philippines	3	113	Martinique	1
14	Canada	27	74	Slovenia	3	114	Mauritius	1
15	South Africa	23	75	Viet Nam	3	115	Moldova, Republic of	1
16	Mexico	22	76	Bolivia	2	116	Myanmar	1
17	Israel	21	77	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	117	Nomadic	1
18	Russian Federation	21	78	Botswana	2	118	Panama	1
19	Spain	20	79	Cuba	2	119	Sao Tome and Principe	1
20	Brazil	19	80	Curaçao	2	120	Senegal	1
21	Morocco	18	61	Slovakia	4	121	Sri Lanka	1
22	Turkey	18	62	Taiwan	4	122	Syrian Arab Republic	1
23	Finland	17	63	Trinidad and Tobago	4	123	Tajikistan	1
24	Norway	16	64	Zimbabwe	4	124	Tanzania	1
25	China	15	65	Albania	3	125	Timor-Leste	1
26	Poland	15	66	Armenia	3	126	Uganda	1

(Continued)



**Table A1.** Continued.

№	Country	Number of art spaces	№	Country	Number of art spaces	№	Country	Number of art spaces
27	Austria	14	67	Belarus	3	127	Venezuela	1
28	Egypt	14	68	Croatia	3			
29	Argentina	12	69	Cyprus	3			
30	Lebanon	12	70	Georgia	3			
31	Bulgaria	11	71	Kenya	3			
32	Hungary	11	72	Palestinian Territory, Occupied	3			
33	Indonesia	11	73	Philippines	3			
34	Japan	11	74	Slovenia	3			
35	Colombia	10	75	Viet Nam	3			
36	Chile	9	76	Bolivia	2			
37	Ireland	9	77	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2			
38	Portugal	9	78	Botswana	2			
39	Romania	9	79	Cuba	2			
40	Iceland	8	80	Curaçao	2			
41	Korea, Republic of	8	81	Ghana	2			
42	Nigeria	8	82	Iran, Islamic Republic of	2			
43	Latvia	7	83	Jamaica	2			
44	New Zealand	7	84	Jordan	2			
45	Thailand	7	85	Macao	2			
46	Tunisia	7	86	Malaysia	2			
47	Estonia	6	87	Nepal	2			
48	Puerto Rico	6	88	Nomadic	2			
49	Not mentioned	5	89	Rwanda	2			
50	Hong Kong	5	90	Sudan	2			
51	Lithuania	5	91	Ukraine	2			
52	Serbia	5	92	Zambia	2			
53	Singapore	5	93	Afghanistan	1			
54	United Arab Emirates	5	94	Algeria	1			
55	Bangladesh	4	95	Aruba	1			
56	Cambodia	4	96	Azerbaijan	1			
57	India	4	97	Bahama's	1			
58	Malta	4	98	Bahrain	1			
59	Pakistan	4	99	Barbados	1			
60	Peru	4	100	Belize	1			

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